

Ministerial Conference on Science and Technology to Increase Agricultural Productivity¹

Closing Remarks

When we began this Conference yesterday morning, the Secretary of Agriculture of the United States asked a very important question. As I sat there, I wondered whether we have, in fact, answered the question.

The Secretary asked “Why are we here?” I think every one in this room should reflect at this point in time as to why we were here, and I think it is important that we leave with an answer to that question individually and collectively. I cannot give an answer for each and every one of you, but I believe that we were here because we are convinced that science and technology can make a difference in the lives of the people of this hemisphere and that we can translate this conviction into actions that can help to make our countries better. I believe we are leaving here with renewed energy for our efforts to increase agricultural productivity in the region.

This Conference has been a learning experience for all of us. We have seen that investment in technology is essential for increasing agricultural productivity and thereby contributing to the reduction of rural and urban poverty. It is also clear that investment in agricultural research for the sustainable growth of the agricultural sector holds one of the most important promises and potential for reducing the inequity and the social disparity that exist between the rich and the poor, the developed and the developing, the haves and the have nots.

We noted that about 40% of all increases in food production in the Americas during the last four decades have been due to the use of modern technology, mainly improved seed varieties and agronomic information. We have seen how the disparity in productivity for certain commodities in different countries is, in part, a consequence of unequal development and investment in research and extension capabilities. Relatively more developed countries usually invest between 1.5% and 2.5% of their agricultural gross product in agricultural science and technology. Many of the smaller countries are barely investing 0.4% or less in technological development.

Research in biotechnology is important. Despite the efforts of the agricultural research centres and other foundations, most biotechnological information is in the hands of the private sector, which may explain why the greatest advances in biotechnology have been in rice, maize, wheat and cotton.

And yet the crops that we use in the South and in the developing world—sorghum, millet, yams, cassava, beans and the like—these orphan crops are not being attended to. We are not doing biotechnology in tropical fruits, we are not doing biotechnology in sweet potatoes, we are not doing biotechnology in yams. I believe that

¹ Institute Headquarters. Coronado, Costa Rica. May 11, 2004

clearly there are many opportunities for us to engage in a new chapter in technological development in our countries.

If I may, I would like to reiterate that one of IICA's institutional priorities is to support our Member States in their efforts to improve their technological situation so that they may better compete in the agribusiness market and, therefore, participate more actively in international trade. To do so, IICA acts as a hemispheric platform for the exchange of experiences and technological information among countries, and for promoting greater cohesion among regional mechanisms for cooperation in research.

We will continue to do that; it is our responsibility. We are committed to supporting the Member States in their actions to enhance technological development in agriculture, in search of greater competitiveness and environmentally friendly technological development.

Establishing a favourable environment for building capacity for agribusiness development, especially for small- and medium-scale producers, is a field of action in which we intend to be more active. IICA's programs to "create exporters," the new program we have just initiated—the Inter-American Program for the Promotion of Agricultural Trade, Agribusiness and Food Safety—, the promotion of "export platforms," and our new Office in Miami, which is dedicated to agribusiness, trade and food safety, are key initiatives we think will make a difference as we seek to help our Member States.

Strong leadership in food safety is critical because, as one speaker mentioned, while the Berlin wall and tariff walls have fallen, the wall of safety is being erected and that is the wall we must find ways to penetrate and remove if possible, so that trade can be a positive factor for development for all countries.

Agricultural health and food safety will continue to be critical factors in the future of agricultural trade and agricultural development and therefore we must invest in phytosanitary infrastructure and in food safety infrastructure. The development banks must recognize that, not only are investments in roads, hospitals and electricity important: investments in food safety and phytosanitary and zoosanitary infrastructure are also critically important for development.

The strategic partnerships which are being forged between the public and the private sectors are critical if we are going to make the kind of quantum leap that is necessary for our countries' development.

This Conference has opened some very real possibilities for implementing a solid strategy for the improvement of agricultural productivity in this region. We must take advantage of the opportunity. Last night during the reception, I had the opportunity to speak with several ministers about how we can institutionalize this kind of dialogue so that we can ensure that when we return next year we have tangible products to show as a result of these meetings, and so that these encounters do not become talk shops.

Having said this, there is little left for me to do but to commit to you the resources of our Institute for your work. With Offices in 34 Member States, we remain committed to accountability and relevance. The Institute must now be demand-driven, driven by the needs of the Member States, bottom up and not top down. And so I would like to leave with you with the commitment of this Administration to work with you in finding solutions to the challenges we face. We shall go forward in partnership to a new horizon where we understand the role of technology and we begin to tap those opportunities that are available to all by becoming more knowledge based and more knowledge oriented. It is clear to me that the gap between the developed and the developing world will widen if we in the developing world do not seek to become knowledge societies.

I would like to take this opportunity to express our thanks to the President of Costa Rica, Dr. Abel Pacheco, for coming here and inaugurating our meeting yesterday morning, despite his very busy agenda. I would also like to thank United States Secretary of Agriculture Ann Veneman for making her time available to us and for sharing with us her knowledge and her vision of future technological development in our countries.

I would like to express our thanks for the support we have received from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Costa Rica's Ministries of Agriculture and of Science and Technology, the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in organizing this Conference.

Before closing, I would like to take this opportunity to call on one of our professionals who has been at the forefront of the efforts to put all of this together: Dr. Jorge Ardila. Jorge has been what we call in the Caribbean the "chief cook and bottle washer" in this business, a champion in putting everything together and ensuring that it all worked. When I was here last Saturday, I saw Jorge and when I came back on Sunday, Jorge was still here. I was concerned as to whether he had slept at the Institute, because we have a norm that states that there shall be no sleeping at the Institute, but when I saw Jorge on Sunday he confirmed to me that, in fact, he had gone home and taken a rest and come back the following day. I would like to thank Jorge and the team that worked with him in putting this together in collaboration with the professionals from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other U.S. agencies that worked hard to make this effort a success.

There are a couple of other IICA staff members I would like to mention: Leda Avila, who coordinates IICA's meeting secretariat; Patricia Leon, who coordinates all that has to do with the press, public information and institutional image; Roxana Montero, the person behind the Historical Gallery; Susana Raine, who coordinated interpretation and translation services, making sure that we communicate properly. I would like to thank all of them and their teams for their excellent work. In the area of security, Alberto Muñoz and his team did an outstanding job in collaboration with the officials of the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Security and the Office of the President. The press, the police, the medical services, the people who prepared the food, the staff at Hotel Radisson ... in a real sense I would like to thank them all. Finally, I would like to

thank you, the participants, I would like to thank the professionals, I would like to thank the speakers, and the organizers of the various coordinating sessions because, at the end of the day, it is you who made it possible, and we are hoping that this Conference will redound to the benefit of the people of our hemisphere and our region.

For those of you who travel, may you have a safe trip back home. I am hoping that we can institutionalize this process and that next year when we meet again, we will have results to show.

Thank you very much.